

# **Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)**

**April 23, 2003**

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) is a serious respiratory illness, that appears to be caused by a newly identified virus. Since Mid-February, the World Health Organization has been investigating outbreaks of SARS in Hanoi, Vietnam, Singapore, and in Hong Kong and the mainland province of Guangdong in the Peoples' Republic of China. Canada, especially the city of Toronto has also been hard hit by SARS. Suspect cases have now been reported in most countries, including the United States.

## **Q: What is happening in Utah?**

Utah has one probable case and four suspect cases of SARS. All of the cases had recently traveled to mainland China, Hong Kong, Philippines, or Taiwan. There are two additional cases that will be added to the probable category shortly. There have been no new cases identified since March.

## **Q: What is Public Health doing to protect people in Utah from catching SARS?**

Public Health is regularly contacting healthcare providers to inform them about the signs and symptoms of SARS. Public Health is following up on all reports of sick individuals to help determine if they might have SARS. Any individual who is suspected of having SARS is carefully questioned to identify all close contacts. A close contact would be someone that they live with or a health care provider. Then, Public Health calls all contacts to inform them that they may have been exposed to SARS. Those contacts are asked to remain at home until we are certain that they do not have the disease.

## **Q: Why don't we quarantine everyone who has traveled to Asia or Toronto?**

- 1: Very few people who travel to Asia come into contact with this disease.
- 2: Healthy people are not infectious, they are not carriers, and you cannot become sick by being near a healthy person.
3. Everyone who returns to the U.S. from affected parts of Asia or Toronto is given instructions to contact their healthcare provider if they become ill.
4. No one in the U.S. has become ill from casual contact with a SARS patient.

This means that schoolmates and coworkers are NOT considered to be at high risk even if a traveler does become ill. Nevertheless, Public Health is looking for evidence of transmission from these types of exposures. In some cases, Public Health may work with schools or worksites to make sure we prevent any chance of spread in these settings.

**Q: Will I catch SARS from a person who recently traveled to Asia or Toronto?**

You cannot catch SARS from a healthy person. There is no reason to avoid healthy individuals who have recently traveled to Asia.

**Q. I'm going to Asia. What can I do to protect myself from SARS while I'm there?**

If you decide to go ahead with your travel to an area with SARS, please keep the following guidelines in mind.

**Before you leave:**

- Assemble a travel health kit containing basic first aid and medical supplies. Be sure to include a thermometer, household disinfectant, a supply of surgical masks and disposable gloves (for use if you or someone you are traveling with becomes ill with SARS), and alcohol-based hand rubs for hand hygiene.
- Inform yourself and others who may be traveling with you about SARS. For information about this illness, see [CDC's SARS Web site](#).
- Be sure you are up to date with all your shots, and see your health-care provider at least 4 to 6 weeks before travel to get any additional shots or information you may need. For information on CDC health recommendations for international travel, see [CDC's Travelers' Health site](#).
- You may wish to check your health insurance plan or get additional insurance that covers medical evacuation in the event of illness. Information about medical evacuation services can be found at this [U.S. Department of State page](#).
- Identify in-country health-care resources in advance of your trip.

**While you are in an area with SARS:**

- To protect against SARS infection, wash your hands frequently.
- To minimize the possibility of infection, you may wish to avoid close contact with large numbers of people as much as possible. CDC does not recommend the routine use of masks or other personal protective equipment while in public areas.

**Q: I just returned from Asia or Toronto. Do I need a doctor's note to return to work or school.**

No. If you are healthy, there is no reason for you to avoid any normal activities. If you develop a fever or cough, do not go to school or work. Be sure to visit your health care provider promptly. Please call ahead so that your doctor can give you instructions to make sure you don't expose anybody at the office or clinic.

**Q: I am very worried about catching SARS.**

Diseases can be very scary. But you should put this disease into perspective. Every year, nearly 1,000,000 people die from disorders related to smoking, and poor eating and exercise habits. About 16,000 die from Influenza. And so far there have been no deaths from SARS in the US. It makes more sense to focus

on health risks that are more likely to affect you and ones you can prevent – Regular exercise, not smoking, eating right, and wearing seatbelts or bicycle/motorcycle helmets are examples.

**Q: How does someone catch SARS?**

It appears to spread through close contact, such as between family members or between patient and doctor. It is probably spread through coughing, sneezing, and other contact with nasal fluids. No one in the US has caught SARS through casual contact, such as from schoolmates or coworkers; some casual transmission has apparently occurred elsewhere in the world, so Utah Public Health remains alert to that possibility.

**Q: What causes it?**

It appears to be caused by a relative of the virus that causes the common cold. That virus is called a “coronavirus”, which refers to the way it looks under an electron microscope. While scientists, doctors and public health officials have many questions left to answer, the rapid identification of the causal agent – in a matter of weeks - is cause for optimism.

**Q: What should I do if I suspect I have SARS?**

First, if you have not traveled to Asia or Toronto, Canada in the past 10 days, or lived with or cared for someone who is ill with SARS, then you are not likely to have SARS. If you have traveled to Asia or Toronto in the past 10 days, and currently have a high fever and/or flu-like symptoms, you should see a doctor as soon as possible. Remember to tell the doctor about your recent travel and call ahead to tell them about your concern.

**Q: How quickly can someone get the disease after being exposed to it?**

One to ten days (average of 4 days).

**Q. What can I do to prevent the spread of SARS?**

Careful hand washing with soap and water can help reduce the spread of respiratory illness including influenza and the common cold. Wash your hands after sneezing, coughing, blowing your nose, etc.

**Q: What are the symptoms?**

A fever over 100.4 degrees which lasts for several days, coughing, and shortness of breath. Other possible symptoms include headache, muscular stiffness, loss of appetite, confusion, rash, and diarrhea.

**Q: Are there any cases of SARS in the United States?**

There are roughly 200 suspected cases of SARS in the United States. Now that a test for the virus is available, it is expected that the number will decrease. That

is because the test will be able to show who actually had SARS versus who had a cold or other infection. No one has died from SARS in the U.S.

**Q: What are the chances of recovering from SARS?**

In the United States, no one has died from SARS. In the rest of the world, about 5% of cases are fatal.

**Q: Is it dangerous to travel to Asia or Toronto? Should I cancel my trip?**

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) advises postponing nonessential travel to mainland China, Hong Kong, Hanoi, Vietnam, or Singapore until further notice.

There is no recommendation to avoid travel to Toronto at this time. However, travelers are to be aware that enhanced transmission of SARS is being detected in Toronto.

**Q: What should I do if I have recently traveled to a country where cases of SARS have been reported?**

You should monitor your own health for 10 days after your return. If you become ill with a fever of over 100.4°F [ $>38.0^{\circ}\text{C}$ ] that is accompanied by a cough or difficulty breathing or that progresses to a cough and/or difficulty breathing, you should consult a health care provider. To help your health care provider make a diagnosis, tell him or her about any recent travel to regions where cases of SARS have been reported and whether you were in contact with someone who had these symptoms.

Please visit [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov), [www.who.int](http://www.who.int), contact your Local Health Department, or the Utah Department of Health, Office of Epidemiology at (801) 538-6191 if you want more information.